

Meningococcal Disease Fact Sheet

***Neisseria meningitidis* (the meningococcus) is a bacterium that can cause serious infections**

The meningococcus causes meningitis (an infection of the covering of the brain and spinal cord), infections of the blood (meningococcemia) and other body sites (for example, joints). These infections may lead to death.

The meningococcus is spread from person-to-person by direct contact

Meningococci are spread by direct, close contact with saliva, mucus, or droplets from the nose and throat of an infected person. Many people carry the bacteria in their noses and throats, but they do not become ill – they are called “carriers.” These carriers can spread the germ to other people.

Symptoms to look for:

- High fever
- Nausea and vomiting
- Severe headache
- Stiffness and pains in the neck, shoulders, and back
- Skin rash of small, bright, red spots or a larger, reddish/purple “bruise”

Symptoms occur within 2 to 10 days (usually 3 to 4 days) after the person has been exposed; symptoms often begin suddenly.

See a doctor immediately for treatment

People who think they may have an infection due to the meningococcus should see a doctor **immediately**. Treatment with an antibiotic should be started right away to stop the infection from causing brain damage or death. Lab tests are needed to prove infection with meningococcus.

People in close contact with a case may need an antibiotic

Check with your doctor or your local health department for advice. Preventive treatment with certain antibiotics is recommended and should not be delayed. Your doctor or health department will decide which medicine is best in your situation.

People in close contact with a case may include:

- Persons who live in the same house
- Persons who have contact with mouth or nose secretions, such as through kissing, sharing eating utensils or sharing cigarettes
- Persons who have done medical treatments such as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or intubation
- Children sharing toys, such as in child care centers, family child care homes, or nursery schools

A vaccine is available to prevent the most common types of meningococcal disease

Check with your doctor or your local health department to see if you should get the vaccine. The vaccine protects a person for less than five years, and it does not protect against all types of the disease. The vaccine is recommended for certain high risk groups (for example, military recruits, travelers to high risk areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, and persons without a spleen) and to help control some outbreaks. It is not a routine childhood shot. In Maryland, vaccination of all college students who live on-campus in a dormitory is required.